

Tricky and the Bug: Dub, Punk, and the Abject

Jayna Brown

In August 2011, a riot shook London and its outlying boroughs for days. Following the shooting of a young black man in Tottenham, the riot was initially a response to the continual police violence and economic oppression experienced by the black population in London and across Britain. Unlike earlier riots, including Notting Hill Carnival in 1976 and Brixton in 1985, this uprising was digitally captured; spectatorship and participation blurred, as flashing cell-phone cameras dotted the streets. Videos were edited and uploaded, and consistently it was dub-inspired studio music that provided the sound track to dissent. More than one YouTube video set its footage of the riot to the sounds of dubstep.

The bleakness of these instantiations of dub evokes the dystopian, the sense that we “got no future,” something long understood by black people. Both forms of antimusic, dub and punk, shared historical space and affective territory, but there were differences. Punk had a commitment to a quick death, an impermanence as its ethos, yet it has proven easily co-opted by waves of nostalgia. Though not immune to forms of commercialization, the continuous beat of dub and its promiscuous ability to move around from place to place allows it to move on from such co-optation, shedding parts of itself like a snake. It melds with and shapes other musical practices; dub has since given aesthetic vocabulary to decades of musical experimentation and dissent. Artists have invented and reinvented, and given their new forms names—drum and bass, jungle, garage, grime, ambient, electronica, dubstep, hyperdub—as they have mutated into what Michael Veal, in his book *Dub: Soundscapes and Shattered Songs in Jamaican Reggae*, has called a “multiplicity of new, studio-based soundscape genres.”¹ Punk also had

a proscriptive tendency, one that could keep a young Ari Up from the joys of a Donna Summer jam. “[We had a] couple of forbidden, secret records like Diana Ross’ ‘Love Hangover’—that was the forbidden disco record that we played,” remembered Ari Up. “We were not supposed to hear or like any disco, but we loved that.”²

While dub has politically and aesthetically influenced punk artists and punk music, here I am interested primarily in what dub and dub-influenced artists, in turn, have found in UK punk. I am interested in how, in a typical blues club in 1981, a poster of *The Great Rock ‘n’ Roll Swindle* could be found “stuck incongruously over the speaker,” next to posters of reggae and African American R&B artists.³ “If you want to know, then I am really a punk,” says Lee Scratch Perry in the 2011 documentary *The Upsetter*. “When I am out of control I cannot be controlled. If I want to spit here I spit here, if I want to piss there I piss there. Anything I want to do I do it.” Perry sits in his studio, scrawling graffiti on its walls; his hair, bound with an ankh headband, is dyed hot pink and forms an aura around his head. “Punk is magic,” he explains. “And it’s the magic people who brought reggae to the top. So we called it a ‘Punky Reggae Party.’”⁴ And it was indeed a party: “The Wailers will be there / The Damned, The Jam, The Clash / Majors will be there / Dr. Feelgood too, ooh / No boring old farts, no boring all farts / No boring old farts will be there!” sings Bob Marley.⁵

Considering the music of two dub-influenced artists, Tricky and the Bug, I explore the ways a punk ethos has continued to be imbricated into dub and its descendants. I am interested in the uses of violence in their works, as a thrusting masculinity, in the case of the Bug, and as an ambivalent site for Tricky. I focus on Tricky’s posture of abjection, as he uses his concept of “brownpunk” to evoke alternative punk sensibilities, to refer to forms of degradation and social rejection that range from the petty criminal to the sexual nonconformist. This evocation opens up punk as a concept defined by, and useful to, those excluded by more proscriptive uses of the term.

In many ways, dub absorbed punk as an affective inspiration, as an unruly refusal to obey. This unruliness is why producers like Kevin Martin continued to express with dub techniques. “[I] was interested in everything that wasn’t harmony, melody, and conservative musical structure,” Martin says of his attraction to dub. “Dub seemed to tear everything to shreds, burn it up, and rearrange the embers.”⁶ Versions of dub remain antiauthoritarian and underground, speaking in its soundscapes of post-colonial oppression and diasporan alienation. Dub disrupts the harmonious, with repetition and out of time uses of timbre and its frequent “lapsing into clouds of pure noise.”⁷ Distinct from more commercial reggae, dub music self-consciously refused slick production techniques; it was created

in an entirely different kind of studio. Dub was DIY, remixing, cutting up, distorting, and sampling sounds. The art of sampling, dub's innovation, anarchically added quotidian sounds of the everyday: from one of the first samples—Lee Scratch Perry's crying baby on "People Funny Boy"—to ringing telephones, sirens, and clanging fire truck bells; these were all-too-familiar sounds from the ghetto. "Dub mixes seemed to issue from a subaltern location in the most *literal* sense," writes Veal.⁸

The ominous, empty, bleak sound of music loosely called dubstep coming out of Britain at the beginning of the twenty-first century reflects the sense that we are living in postapocalyptic times. We are enveloped in gray, sharp tones, the camouflage of post-9/11 Anglo/American paranoia and the reverberations of US/UK-led imperial wars. These ragga- and dancehall-based soundscapes, such as those found on the Bug's 2008 collection *London Zoo*, yoke militarism to the quotidian violence of precarity; we are stranded in a wasteland created for those subjects made socially redundant and forced into unemployment, tracked into the military, or housed in prisons. The world of the Bug's *London Zoo* is gun culture; sirens and gunshots punctuate most of the rhythms. We are on a masculinist terrain of military occupation and ubiquitous street violence, run by the "police and some bad boy army," as Ricky Ranking calls it on the track "Murder We."⁹ "People are turning so mad, the place is turning so bad, the streets are flowing blood red, people wanna murder we," he intones. In *London Zoo*'s night vision, modernity as it has unfolded is a state of permanent war. While we are in armed conflict, there can be no revolution in a known sense, for there is nothing left to blow up. Only bugs can survive, the world is already destroyed, and we are living in the aftermath.

"The revolution will be televised in Iran and the Holy Koran," recites Tricky in his song "Coalition," from his album *Knowle West Boy*, also released in 2008. Not usually overtly political, here Tricky offers open critique of US and UK wars in Iraq and Afghanistan, which he links to global, corporate, and consumer capitalism. "You can go on to the internet, log in to your local war / You can read your paper, receive a mental scar / Gets your happy meal in your happy car / You can make more money, more money / But still here you are." Tricky links military to racist violence: "I'm a Muslim, I'm a Jew / I'm Ku Klux Klan, I'm a nigger too."¹⁰ While Tricky is ambivalent about other forms of violence, he is openly critical of militarism. "Black Steel," a cover of Public Enemy's classic, appears on his first album, *Maxinquaye*, set to a punk rock beat, and sung by Martina Topley-Bird. The song is a blasting critique of racism, institutionalized through the military and prison systems.¹¹

Tricky grew up surrounded by violence. Like his childhood on the estates, his musical world is awash with it. It is not a matter of accepting or resisting violence, but surviving in a world constantly mediated by it.

"It's always been around me," he says. "My cousin got murdered in East Ham a few years ago; he got shot in his head. I've had one uncle murdered in Bristol. A friend of the family got shot in his head and they chopped off his arms, his legs. You know, I'm a musician but I still hear a lot."¹² Tricky's relation to violence is qualitatively different from the sometimes serious violence of the punk rock posture, or the murderer persona of ragga, dancehall, and rap. Yet it remains intimately linked with certain trajectories of these musical formations, both affectively and historically, as they articulate through an abject relation to dominant social formations.

Acts of punk violence were important performances of the abject—bleeding, spitting, and pissing—that related to a wider condition of abjection. Self-inflicted wounds, cuts from beer bottles, minor scuffles, public pissing, and lots of spitting at the bands became key acts of a particularly influential moment in male punkness. Such performances became ritualistic practices, and included demonstrative crimes of dissent: minor law-breaking, vandalism, defamation of public property, drug use. All were acts that embraced and celebrated a state of social ostracism.

Dancehall, ragga, and rap music articulate within a culture of violence, organized around systems of criminality associated with poverty. The gun is the music's central fetish. It is marked by an intimacy with death and states of death-in-life, a fatalist response to institutionally established forms of racist violence. We can understand the kinds of obsession with inflicting harm to others as a form of abjection, in a collective sense; the infliction is not just to another individual, it is to the wider social community. But, like punk, they too perform particular kinds of masculinity, those based in extreme heterosexual sex or exchanges of violence between men. Tricky's style plays with the hard-man mystique at the heart of music from the street. What I find interesting is the ways Tricky's creative responses to growing up soaked in an environment of masculinized violence, and to the strictures of genre, seriously violate the masculinist mandate of the outlaw's bildungsroman.

Kevin Martin, as the Bug, is equally unruly in attention to the regulations of genre. Initially involved in punk and more experimental forms, he took up dub-related music to reflect an abjected, dark, and dystopian world. Abjection in the Bug's creations on his collection *London Zoo* refers to the conditions of black, brown, and poor, yet does not disturb ideas of masculinity or associations with organized violence in the way Tricky's music does.

Tricky is a prolific artist, producing eight albums following his release of the momentous album *Maxinquaye* in 1995. With vocals from Martina Topley-Bird, the sound, mood, and style of the music were hard to categorize, as they emerge from an amorphous place in-between genres, equally disobedient to the rules bounding definitions. The music press had

coined the term *trip hop* to try to define the range of music being made in Bristol at the time, a term Tricky despises. “I read this thing that said I was one of the innovators of trip-hop, and it’s so stupid, so stupid. I’m not even making hip-hop let alone this trip-hop bollocks,” Tricky says.¹³ “You can be singing really sweetly about stabbing somebody,” says Martina. “I really like these contrasts.”¹⁴ She has since gone on, in her low-key way, to produce her own music.

Tricky’s technique was forged in a musical environment shaped by the established sound-system culture of Bristol’s Jamaican population, the post-house-dance music scene, and hip hop. When asked in 2012 what he had wanted to achieve with his first album, he answered, “To do an album that’s going to fuck everybody up. No compromise whatsoever. Being a rapper back then was about not being seen, being undercover—fucking punk, y’know?”¹⁵

Punk, in this instance, seems to signal for Tricky a certain cloak of invisibility, the freedom of not being seen, of being under a cover of nonrecognition from the music industry, and from a wider society. Tricky continues to use the term *punk*. Teaming up with Chris Blackwell, the legendary reggae producer and founder of Island Records, Tricky formed a label and called it Brownpunk in 2007. He signed musicians across a range of genres, from rap and British pop to metal and punk artists. “Brownpunk is I think an appropriate name,” Tricky says, “by any means necessary, you know what I’m saying? We’re still hustling, for studio time, begging and borrowing.”¹⁶ Here the punk is brown, or the brown is punk, evoking both black self-determination and radical refusal as well as a punk DIY spirit. Tricky’s use of (brown)punk refers not just to the youthfully clamorous and (sometimes) politically dissenting. Tricky’s compound word, as I argue, is quite complex, and kicks alive multiple meanings.

Brownpunk gives us a sense of punk as representing the societally ejected, the “flowers in the dustbin” of history. Tricky’s use of punk in the name of his label is not an act of nostalgia or a self-conscious retro move; rather, it evokes a set of older meanings for the word. Brownpunk is a specific reference to the systematically, institutionally criminalized; the socially ostracized; the debased: the petty thief, the degenerate, the madman, the gender misfit, the sexual miscreant. Punk in this sense is not just a lifestyle choice or a rebellious phase, but a fundamental condition of being, understood profoundly in the experience of being poor, sexually nonconformist, or black.

Tricky, taking the name Brownpunk for his record label, uses the concept as a reference to the socially abject. I explore the way Tricky’s performances of abjection open up the term *punk*, his embrace of its association with humiliation and debasement destabilizing not just dominant normative subject positions, but an accepted, typically male, subaltern

normative. Its power then is, in Julia Kristeva's words, "what disturbs identity, system, order. What does not respect borders, positions, rules."¹⁷ I focus on the ways Tricky's artistry explodes stable boundaries, particularly around violence, race, sexuality, and gender.

Developed as a theoretical category in the 1980s, the concept of the abject has been given new life in recent black queer theory, particularly in the works of Darieck Scott and Kathryn Bond Stockton, in relation to black life and processes of racialization.¹⁸ In thinking of Tricky's music, I refer to earlier ideas of the abject, developed by Kristeva and Leo Bersani, ideas that Scott and Stockton use and critique, as well as the latter's usages that draw attention to specifically racialized applications of the concept.

I am interested in the ways Tricky inhabits the abject in very different ways than simply as the banished and debased racialized subject. Like Scott, I am reaching for the idea that, as Kristeva put it, "from its place of banishment, the abject does not cease challenging its master."¹⁹ The challenge comes in the form of a destabilization of boundaries, the way the socially muted continue to scream in the ears of normative expectations, even those of the resisting subject. The deep-seated threaten the sanctity, and regulation, of the social body's idea of its own solidity.

In Tricky's surrealist, intimate, feminized response to violence and family dysfunction, his abjection spells a disintegration of the self through Bataillean limit experiences: sex and death, extreme states of anguish, pain, fear, and shame, which explode the ego's notion of the self. In most of his compositions, Tricky uses vocalists as his amanuenses, and his songs are often a weave of different voices, speaking from several subject positions, offering at times a collective voice, but most often a fractured and collaged sense of self. "Open to a mode that exceeds language," Tricky's signature sound is an often indecipherable mumble of the subconscious.²⁰ His surrealist solipsism is intensely interior, plumbing semilinguistic, emotional space.

Inhabiting the place where "meaning collapses," Tricky maintains an ambiguous positionality. He inhabits "the in-between, the ambiguous, the composite" when it comes to gendered expectations and sexuality.²¹ His profound ambiguity about masculinized, organized violence is a key part of his reluctance regarding gendered expectations. Tricky marks his own subject position as such. "I'm a big wannabe, to be honest you can probably hear it in my music," he says. "I wanna be a tough guy, I wanna be a girl."²²

Stockton and Scott utilize the concept of abjection not just to refer to blackness as a permanent condition of repulsion, but to try to understand black survival. In theorizing the relationship between blackness and abjection, Scott argues that "black people have had to be inside, as it were, abjection, have had to embody it and to *be* it in the lack of command of their embodiment that becoming black decrees. . . . What are the elements of

survival *in* abjection, or *as* abjection?”²³ I would add the question of how black people survive *through* abjection, in both its senses, that is, to move in and out of space and to be a conductive medium. These questions, I argue, are what Tricky’s performances of abjection leave us to rumble with.

Before he found dub, Kevin Martin’s initial musical inspiration was punk. “Punk music turned me full-stop on to music,” he told an interviewer. “I learned more about politics, philosophy, aesthetics, sociology—you name it—through the focal point of punk. It seemed like everything that I hated about English conservative monoculture was being burned and turned upside down through music. . . . It was the DIY ethic that caught me.”²⁴ In a subsequent interview, he elaborates:

I first got inspired by Crass, Discharge, 23 Skidoo, Killing Joke, Public Image Limited, Joy Division, The Birthday Party. . . . People who were fucking out there. People who wanted to fuck with you and themselves. . . . Punk music happened to me. I listened to the Sex Pistols when I was about seven and I was totally mortified and shocked. And later I listened to CRASS and anything that was nihilistic and extreme, as a way of trying to understand this fucked up world around me. And I’m still no clearer about the world but I feel that music helps me cope with this.²⁵

Martin’s turning point was when he went to see Iration Steppas and the Disciples do a sound clash. “As soon as I knew anything about dub, it was like, Wow, this is incredible. It was a form of antimusic that heightened the potential psychedelia. . . . It almost altered my internal DNA and how I appreciated music,” says Martin.²⁶ “To be honest, Adrian [Sherwood] was a massive influence on The Bug. I mean *massive*. . . . I was a huge dub fan when I was growing up. I was a huge fan of Scientist, King Tubby and Lee Perry. And sure, those early African Headcharge albums? Wow.”²⁷

White dissenters have historically been inspired by black expressive cultures as a way to represent their own rebellion, sometimes as a fad, sometimes in productive and lasting ways. Critics and music historians have carefully and thoughtfully explored the important connections, both historical and affective, between punk and reggae musics, particularly dub, and the ways dub culture influenced the punk rock scene in 1970s Britain.²⁸ “Punk and reggae musicians were involved in a musical and social dialogue,” writes Michael Veal.²⁹ Underground reggae, and dub in particular, he notes, appealed to the young and disaffected white working-class kids in the UK: “Punks responded . . . to reggae’s articulation of social marginality.”³⁰ British artists, including Adrian Sherwood, John Lydon, Jah Wobble, and Ari Up, took up dub in their performances and production, as have subsequent generations of white musicians.

As “The Bug,” Martin produced his collection *London Zoo* in 2008.

It took three years, from 2005 to 2008, to produce the collection, which features a number of grime, ragga, and dancehall artists, including DJ Flowdan, Tippa Irie, Ricky Ranking, and Warrior Queen. The music on *London Zoo* is, to use Martin's words, a kind of "dystopian sci-fi ragga," giving sound to the ethos of no future.³¹ Historically punk was given credit for most poignantly articulating this ethos, but it is one long understood by formerly colonized subjects, as is the art of living through that condemned condition.

In addition to respecting punk as a historical and aesthetic phenomenon, I take punk as an analytic. *Punk*, as Tavia Nyong'o points out, is not a stable term. It is associated with a historical and aesthetic movement, marked by rebellion and the rejection of dominant social formations, but, as Nyong'o explains, the term is an "intrinsic malapropism" that carries a wider range of meanings: it can refer to prison culture's term for a "bottom," or the receptive partner in anal sex (particularly in African American parlance); it can be used as a verb, to mean the act of humiliating someone; or it can mean a rotten piece of wood.³² Most meanings are organized around some form of societal rejection and mortification. As Nyong'o summarizes: "This topology of the punk enables a running through and out of the shit the world throws at its most vulnerable."³³ Considering this wider range of meaning, what ground does punk open up for black people and black music? What kinds of affective meanings does it carry? How has it been rearticulated in different spatiotemporal frameworks?

Bristol-Blues Bruising

We can understand the abject as that which is violently ejected from the self, the effluvium, the spit and piss that Perry asserted he had a right to secrete anywhere. As Scott argues, the processes of racialization create black life as a permanent condition of repulsion. Black life was the "muck," the funk, which had to be vomited and excreted from the social body for that body to remain stable.³⁴

That this association, between the abject and blackness, is fundamental to how race is perceived, is made clear in a strange, surrealist piece David Bowie wrote for *Q* magazine in October 1995 after attending a Tricky and Martina show. Sections of Bowie's piece employ the very language of the abject in depicting Tricky and Martina in relation to their audience. "It gets loud. It gets a Bristol-blues bruising buffered by the pace of dub," Bowie says.

The pace of dub where Karmacoma shouts: "We don't look for music, it just hangs there." His stand, it's just like Tricky Thaws to say that. In vague memory of the slow-simmering garden wall where you, Martina, sang me

down, under the turf. Fighting for air, I was. I stole away in the yellow nether regions round the corner. All the other sounds had been farmed-out and cut-up. So get cut thought I. Get cut and rough and raw like the end of the world. Escape this jonbarry of a British Isle hell. Escape this heat-death diving into a gene-pool, just for a laugh, like Tricky and Martina. I was the Original Mesmer and they were just the clubbers, so I waited and watched the fat-tracks slither across the stage like slimey steam assassins. Eating all they slid over. Into those front-row mouths they squirmed, trails of mucus on well-trained pink-chinned limeys.³⁵

What's particularly interesting is that Bowie's evocation of the abject is racialized, and his evocation of race is specifically visceral, biological. It literally biologizes the social body; beginning with the quintessential image of an English garden wall and English soil, Bowie employs racialized and racializing language of a particularly nationalist and eugenicist kind. Tricky and Martina are violating the British body, spelling the "heat death of a gene-pool," the death of a pure white Englishness. There is a resonance of the historical politics of the colonial encounter, as the term *limeys* is an evocation of British maritime dominance, connected intimately to slavery and colonialism.

Bowie associates their music with violence, death, and cannibalism, but also extreme pleasure. Squirming into the mouths of the "limeys," leaving "trails of mucus," Tricky's music, black music, is likened to a repulsive, secreting, and voracious creature, invading white British mouths and ears. But Bowie's metaphors are heavily eroticized, with black music made the fetish, as the "well-trained pink-chinned limeys" are subsumed by a forced fellatio. Bowie enjoys a certain masochistic pleasure in his "escape" from whiteness, as he opens himself to desirous debasement. Bowie makes the connection between sex and death, eros and thanatos, through racialized and sexualized encounter. "My little white hard life looks up at me and forms the shape of all my hopes and desires," writes Bowie. "This must be sex as death . . . this album is over. It was the best of chimes. It was the hearse of chimes. Here come the horses to drag me to bed. Here come the Tricky to fuck up my head."³⁶

Bowie, the "Original Mesmer," relinquishes some of his mesmeric power here to Tricky, in the language of a racialized homoeroticism. His does so the way surrealists took to the force of possession, a state of being they attributed to, among other processes and practices, black music and dance. The well-trained European is rejuvenated through a series of little deaths; he relinquishes control to his vital, if self-destructive, subconscious.

In *Extravagant Abjection*, Scott's argument is that "abjection in/of blackness endows its inheritors with a form of counterintuitive *power*," or something he suggests we can think of as

"Black power" . . . is found at the point of the apparent erasure of ego-protections, at the point at which the constellation of tropes that we call *identity, body, race, nation* seem to reveal themselves as utterly penetrated and compromised, without defensible boundary. "Power" in this context assumes a form that seems repugnant or even nonsensical, for its condition of appearance [is] defeat and violation, and thus it seems to be antithetical to the robust self-endorsement that the definition of Black Power in American political history emphasizes.³⁷

Tricky's lack of black male posturing illustrates Scott's argument to a point. Tricky does not "represent the hood" in the manner expected of a kind of authorial, racially restorative masculinity. Yet Tricky's state of abjection is not simply black; it is more accurately, as Scott puts it, "human abjection as represented and lived in the experience of being-black," but is also in excess of blackness. Tricky does reference black musical culture in his music. He distances himself from rap or hip hop with his use of historical forms of African American music: the blues ("Singing the Blues"), African American prison songs, and gospel music ("Broken Homes"). His music gives voice to a certain ambiguous relationship, both intimate and distant, to thug life in his use of dub and hardcore ragga.

Tricky's artistic agenda insists on an amorphousness of various kinds: musical genre, selfhood, race, and notions of gender. "I've been blessed because no-one can put my music in a box—it's not black, it's not white, it's not female, it's not male," Tricky says, on the release of his album *Mixed Race* in 2010, perhaps his most eclectic yet, folding into its compositions disco, punk and postpunk, grime, and garage, among others.³⁸

Tricky's music is consciously about constructions of gender, often embracing liminal gendered positions and erotic choices. He is known for cross-dressing at shows and for publicity photos (he dons a wedding dress for the artwork of *Maxinquaye*), as well as for a kind of aesthetic merger with the female singers on his albums. His songs are often an intimate sharing of his private self, and often tinged with an anger and recklessness. Full of contradiction, Tricky refuses to represent a gendered authenticity. "By the way, what sex are you," he asks in "Coalition." "If you're a man, be a man / But if you wanna be a woman / I guess you do, do/ What you can (can) / You say you like girls (girls) / So why are you with boys?"³⁹

Yet I don't want to overstate the political content of Tricky's music. His lyrics are often only obliquely political. Most songs are at least in part fairly solipsistic, and many are, not very surprisingly, concerned with the vicissitudes of fame. In referring to the abject in Tricky's music, I don't wish to reproduce a "slide . . . from identity subversion to political subversiveness," which is Stockton's critique of Kristeva.⁴⁰ After all, Tricky's ambiguity around gender and violence is just that: an opening for larger

critique, rather than political opposition in itself. In his embodiment of contradiction, in some places he is reproducing the very categories he is, in other places, questioning. I add these cautions not to reverse my argument but only to infuse it. Even Tricky's intermittent violations, his refusal to behave along the lines of gendered (and genre) expectations, his evocations of punk, are perhaps more politically resonant than Stockton would have it.

"Those Men Will Break Your Bones"

Tricky's autobiographical accounts of his early life inform his music, particularly his 2008 album *Knowle West Boy*. "On the estate there were a lot of tough families, hardworking families, and also hard criminal families," Tricky says, in a promotional video for the album. Key parts of Tricky's life, or the life of his presented self, were "limit experiences," extreme examples of abandonment, anguish, and violence. His mother, half Ghanaian, half English, committed suicide when Tricky was four years old. After his mother's suicide, he went to live with her mother. As he puts it, his white grandmother's family was a well-known crime family; they were the "original Knowle Westers," he explains. "My Great Grandad . . . used to bring back horses from Ireland, and go out rabbiting, and he was a fighter. . . . Everybody knew our family in Knowle West, all three generations. I had it kinda easy growing up there because of my uncles. . . . It was a notorious, notorious family."⁴¹ Many of Tricky's songs are explicitly about conditions of life in poor housing estate communities in Britain and the cultures of illegality formed there. "They call me council estate they call me can't go straight / they call me crime rate they call me can't go straight," run the first lines of his song "Council Estate." As he notes, his songs are not only based on his own experiences, but also incorporate the experiences of others.

While Tricky refers to a creative state of no quarter, of underground rap as "fucking punk," the soft, absorbing vulnerability of much of the music on his albums defies the hard muscularity of much punk, or rap, music. Neither influence captures the intensely internal, often mournful, haunted, and grieving climate of Tricky and Martina Topley-Bird's music on *Maxinquaye*, his warm and breathy timbre lying underneath her cold sweetness. The album was named for Tricky's mother, and part of the haunted quality of many of his tracks through the years, Tricky explains, reflects his mother's suicide: "It's my mum speaking through me; a lot of my lyrics are written from a woman's point of view."⁴² Part of the power of "Black Steel," a single from this album, is that it is sung by his partner Martina, whose soft yet heartless voice jars our gendered expectations, as it juxtaposes the rap's male-centered perspective.

Tricky's music consistently features women vocalists, whose voices

lay on top of Tricky's sometimes barely audible growls and murmurs. The female voice began with that of Martina on *Maxinquaye*, and voices on subsequent albums include those of well-known vocalists Björk and Siouxi Sioux (*Nearly God*, 1996), PJ Harvey (*Angels with Dirty Faces*, 1998), Alanis Morissette and Ambersunshower (*Blowback*, 2001), as well as lesser-known vocalists like Kioka Williams (*Juxtapose*, 1999), Costanza Francavilla (*Vulnerable*, 2003), Veronika Coassolo (*Knowle West Boy*, 2008), and Franky Riley (*Mixed Race*, 2010). But while the signature sound of these women's voices is smooth and lilting, they are distinctly far from soothing; they are not the sound of a soft female touch or wholesome comfort, as in the rhythm and blues refrains found in much hip-hop music. Nor are they the unruly screams of women punk rock vocalists and their descendants. They are instead melancholic, ghostly, ethereal, cold, even dead. These qualities reflect Tricky's often bleak and surreal lyrics. "The place where I stand gives way to liquid lino / Underneath the weeping willow lies a weeping wino," runs the refrain of "Ponderosa." They reflect a kind of lingering presence, a refusal of the afterlife, a melancholy held in his songs.⁴³

The use of women's voices can be construed as a typical move, by which the male musician transposes the song's emotionality onto the female presence in the music. She "backs up" the male front man, adding only a reinforcing accompaniment. While Tricky does not shed gendered positionalities entirely, he is doing something much more collaborative with the women's voices. His voice remains muted, like the subconscious, while the female voices run atop with the clear lyrics of the song.

The women's vocals dovetail powerfully with those songs that reflect Tricky's ambiguous relationship to cultures of violence. The types of violence Tricky refers to are associated with deep generational poverty and alternative economies of organized crime and prison culture. "I'm not a bad boy but I've been around all that. I've had three people in my family murdered. Two stabbings. One shooting," he relates.⁴⁴ "I grew up listening to prison songs and prison stories. So if there is any question why my music's dark, it's obvious."⁴⁵ Songs like "Ghetto Stars," the closest Tricky gets to a gangster rap, are sung by women. "Gonna make a trip down to see my baby he is locked in a cell / When I see my sweetheart through the bars, he don't look well," sings the young Irish vocalist Franky Riley, who authored most of the song. Interspersed with Franky is a black woman in African headdress, singing the song in sign language, both of them situated on the outdoor walkways that distinguish British tower block housing estates. Underneath Franky's and the signing woman's voices, Tricky's talk of his family members in prison evokes the mundane and circumscribed quality of criminal life, the opposite of the wealth-soaked dreamscape gangster rap claims as its own. Tricky begins the video to "Ghetto Stars"

with an overt caution to avoid the traps of ghetto life, opening with an interview with Freddie Foreman, a famous British “career criminal,” most well-known for his participation in the Security Express robbery of 1983. (Freddie Foreman was also the obsession of Malcolm McLaren, following the breakup of the Pistols). Yet there is also a wink here, a nod to Foreman’s genius and a sense of proud affiliation to life on the estates. “I really love my family,” Tricky repeats, with a kind of unbreakable loyalty.⁴⁶

Some of the most poignant songs about violence come from a perspective of receptivity and vulnerability, through the use of women’s voices. “Those men will break your bones / Don’t know how to build stable homes,” intones PJ Harvey in “Broken Homes,” from the album *Blowback*. To a funereal tune and beat, a gospel choir of black women carries the chorus behind Harvey’s gray intonation. Their voices, and the sepulchral timbre of the music, give sound to a kind of violence Tricky knows, emanating from a place where home and street blur. “There was a lot of fighting in my great-grandmother’s house,” remembers Tricky. “I’ve seen my uncles fight in the street, I’ve seen my grandmother fight in the street, it becomes normal.”⁴⁷ In this song, the violence is not the homosocial exchange of violence between men on the street or battlefield. But with its quiet, stately rhythm, the song does not feel to be from quite as blurred a place between street and home as Tricky remembers from his childhood. It is the sound of a late-night, private abuse that takes place in the home. The music video itself narrates this violence. In the video a man beats and eventually kills his wife in their living room. Scenes of a funeral procession, with pallbearers carrying a casket into a cathedral, are interchanged with scenes of a woman seated at a kitchen table and flashbacks of a man threatening and eventually shooting her. Tricky puts himself at a remove, riding in a taxi for most of the song, in transit between public and private, home and street, but also in intimate relationship to the woman, as he breathes underneath and around and in support of Harvey’s voice.

Tricky often weaves other male singers with female voices for his songs depicting street violence. “If I wanted to do a gangsta rap album, I’ve more right to do it than most people, but it’s just not me, so a song like ‘Murder Weapon,’ I’ve got friends singing it, because I don’t want to get too close to it.”⁴⁸ On the song “Over Me” (*Blowback*), Hawkman alternates his rap with Ambersunshower’s vocals. “When love is lost, all I hear is gunshots, over me / when love is drawn it soaks and flows all over me,” sings Ambersunshower, evoking a kind of ecstatic baptism, a profane ritual combining sex and death. Hawkman’s intertwined ragga verses narrate acts of killing and bloodshed. “Like sunshine they shot him over and over, make sure them dead their body in a corner / Blood run down like some stagnant water.”⁴⁹ Blood is both love, pumping through the heart, and a foul, dead fluid, the ejected abject.

Tricky does not divorce himself from the violence and masculinity of the world he depicts. There is no “outside,” but a pervasive force field of associations and loyalties that form the known universe. “When you get brought up on a council estate there’s this loyalty thing, this weird concrete council estate loyalty,” Tricky explains, “where you’re forced to do something. The community expects you to do something. Otherwise there’s certain places you’re gonna get eaten up, swallowed real quick.”⁵⁰ There is a centripetal pull, into a world of street laws and affiliations that will, if not heeded, gulp you down.

One of Tricky’s first releases under his Brownpunk label was a faux documentary, following Tricky and his stable of artists of “a few friends and a few family” (The Dirty, Kira, Cedelia Marley, Face, First Blood, Tricky’s brother Marlon Thaws) as they struggle to keep the label afloat.⁵¹ Tricky and the other musicians, mainly lads from the estates, sell weed and stage heists, and Tricky bets all of his (borrowed) money on a female Muay Thai fighter. It is not a triumphant tale of rags-to-riches braggadocio; the musicians often face humiliating failure in the form of angry drug dealers and moneylenders (whose money they lose). Apart from this plotline, the film is filled with violence and ethical ambiguities. The film is brimming with a confusion of loyalties and their violations. People are killed, betrayed, and intimidated, but not in any celebratory way. Tricky himself acts out the most disturbing sexualized violence in the film. “You want to make a record?” he asks Kira, making it conditional on her participation in a robbery. But his actions seem prescribed, in contradiction with his jocular generosity.

The ambiguity about violence is self-conscious. In his contradictory actions—participating in violence on the one hand, critiquing it on the other—Tricky demonstrates a distinct fracturing of self, resulting in contradictory behavior. Right after having his friend beaten, he says to the camera: “I’ve never had trouble with my conscience, since I was a kid, funnily enough. But that’s because I don’t do anything bad. I don’t do anything negative. I think if you do dark stuff you’re gonna probably have a guilty conscience, but I’m not involved in any kind of darkness as such, so I don’t have a guilty conscience at all.” In between these documentary-style interviews are impressionistic shots of Tricky crying through a window, flashing back to his treatment of Kira, and to his friend, whose face is covered in blood. Yet he continues, “I think the music industry has no room for the gun culture, or the violence, I’m just not into it at all, it’s just not my thing.” This part of the mock interview is interspersed with shots of him and his friend on a rooftop with a sniper rifle, assassinating the moneylender.

But even when Tricky flirts with the very economies of violence he critiques, there remains a lack of serious commitment, or a questioning

investment, marked by his distinct lack of braggadocio. “You’re an asshole,” says the moneylender, to which Tricky, in the face of humiliation, just sits and laughs. “Punk passivity,” Nyong’o writes, “its masochistic drive towards unbecoming, is not the acceptance of social exclusion or stigma, but a withdrawal from the constraints of an affirmative culture.”⁵²

“Murder We”

The dystopian landscape of many black lives offers a template for apocalyptic parables of a global scope. The Bug’s adaptations of dub, the sound track to a bleak dystopian future, give a sonorous heartbeat to a life where death is never far away. Gun culture becomes an aesthetic, embedded in a history of violence from colonialism and postcolonial oppression, and the military roots of technology show. In the world of the Bug’s *London Zoo*, we enter a terrain of sound based in a concept of frequency as power and sound as warfare. The Bug and a number of his dub-influenced musical contemporaries form an intelligentsia of sorts. Kevin Martin has an academic relationship to his music, as does his friend Steve Goodman.

In his work on sound culture, Steve Goodman, also known as the DJ Kode9, theorizes an approach to the sonic as, at its fundamental level, potentially lethal. He focuses on the development of sonic capabilities through militarized technologies, and on sound and frequency’s military uses. He thinks about acoustic weaponry in relation to the music of the club. What he calls “audiosocial radiation” operates on a continuum, between, say, a sonic bomb and a good rave: “Extensive and intensive tendencies of audiosocial radiation can also be described as, on the one hand, centrifugal, efferent, repulsive, producing a movement that spirals out from its source, and on the other hand, a centripetal, afferent, attractional power producing a movement that spirals in toward a source.”⁵³ Either way, sound becomes power becomes invasion.

The Bug’s video for the song “Poison Dart” provides a landscape in which the sonic is the language of war. It is set in a desert, echoing the terrain of the wars being waged by the US and the UK in the Middle East and Afghanistan. A destroyed London looms in the background, the Gherkin and the London Eye still visible on the horizon. Rolling toward us are tanks, each mounted with gigantic woofers, retracting rhythmically like shooting canons. Emerging from a crack in the earth is a metal pod, covered in spikes, with a screen in it, with the face of Warrior Queen, who soon begins singing in a thin, piercing monotone. She floats above the emptied landscape, in a vessel far from any Mothership, a distinctly dangerous ovary, a cold pod shooting poison darts.

Like Tricky, and as an exception to the very male environment of electronica music, the Bug features a female vocalist on *London Zoo*.

Annette Henry, a.k.a. the Warrior Queen, moved from Jamaica to England in 2001, previously performing as roots reggae singer “Wendy Culture,” but gave that up to become a completely different persona. She began appearing on the tracks of various dubstep DJs, including a track with producer Pressure on the sound track to the postapocalyptic film *Children of Men*, providing “Triple X” and “slack lyrics.” She says: “Annette is just me, Annette is totally cool. Warrior Queen is fierce and she’s out to get you . . . if you want the real cool deal that’s Annette in the day but if its in the night its Warrior Queen and you got to prepare, man.”⁵⁴ When she performs she is, like Lee Scratch Perry, “uncontrollable,” she explains.

Unlike the cool, melancholic, and passive voices on Tricky’s albums, Warrior Queen brings the opposite, her voice the wailing siren of daily dystopian existence. Unlike the voices in Tricky’s music, Warrior Queen is not ghostly; she is not the mother, the womb, and not even faintly the moral touchstone of the song. Her voice pierces, whines, drones, and drills; it is a weapon, and invades the body, piercing through the eardrum. The vocalists in Tricky’s music run counter to the gunslingers’ verses, while Warrior Queen’s voice is part of the armory. She may not sling a gun, she says, but she doesn’t have to. She enters the system and kills it from within, like sonic biological warfare. What we have may in fact not be human, but a sonic extraction, encapsulated in a cold metal pod. We are free of the nurturing or sexual role of the singing voice in otherwise male instrumentalized music. But there remains an embrace of militarization as both metaphor and referent.

A positive read of the video would point out that the DJs, the rebel soldiers, are in fact appropriating the military equipment, repurposing the sonic weaponry and turning it to a “centrifugal, afferent, and attractional” frequency. We will dance, not die. The video is not free of the sexualized female body; and, as a refrain, the women dance. Yet they do so in the flickering digital half-life of broken infrared night vision, like wraiths, separated from their human form, existing only in the digital world, perhaps part of the warfare. Dance is not necessarily reparative. We don’t have that liberal humanist call to, as Kodwo Eshun says, “struggle for inclusion in the human species” or be governed by a “drive to banish alienation, and to recover a sense of the whole human being.”⁵⁵ There is a call here, however, for resistance to the forces that have destroyed the world. As night falls, a troop of replicating rastas skank in front of the advancing woofers, accompanied by a scuttling tweeter beetle, suggesting both the abjected survivors of modern devastation, but also collective musical experience. The music organizes us in a different formation, yet we are still ultimately caught in the model of warfare as the grounds of sonic expression, expulsion, and gathering.

With its bleak dissonance, such a song may give us a more useful

genealogy of punk than the resurrection of the past in frequent tribute bands, band reunions, and memorialization of certain tunes and historical moments. *Maxinquaye* was an album that stayed in the minds of many, and Tricky and Martina did a reunion tour in April 2012. Yet this holds no candle to the ways classic punk has been memorialized. In a deeply ironic turn, the Sex Pistols' "God Save the Queen" was transformed into a proud part of British history, woven into the sound track of the opening ceremony for the 2012 Olympics. What was shocking, unheard of, abject, now can become part of the warp and woof of normative society. Yet, there will always be riots, and there will always be music to accompany them.

Notes

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18. Darieck Scott, *Extravagant Abjection: Blackness, Power, and Sexuality in the African American Literary Imagination* (New York: New York University Press, 2010); Kathryn Bond Stockton, *Beautiful Bottom, Beautiful Shame: Where "Black" Meets "Queer"* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2006).

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20. I take this phrase from Fred Botting and Scott Wilson, eds., "Introduction: From Experience to Economy," in *The Bataille Reader* (London: Blackwell, 1997), 1.
21. Kristeva, *Powers of Horror*, 2.
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29. Veal, *Dub*, 225.
30. Ibid.
31. Martin, interview by Doran.
32. Tavia Nyong'o, "Brown Punk: Kalup Linzy's Musical Anticipations," *TDR: The Drama Review* 54, no. 3 (2010): 75.
33. Ibid.
34. The abject is not just the object but the process of ejection: "Loathing an item of food, a piece of filth, waste, dung, the spasms and vomiting that protect me. . . . The repugnance, retching that thrusts me away from defilement, sewage, muck." Kristeva, *Powers of Horror*, 2.
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